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HISTORY'S WHO'S WHO -- OSCAR COLLINS February 1



Oscar Collins, 1990

Oscar Collins rose from GS-3 to the deputy chief of a key component. Collins grew up in Washington; his father was a career employee at the Department of the Interior, serving 56 years there. His mother had numerous jobs in that time, including a short time as a domestic at the White House. Given the lack of childcare at that time, Oscar sometimes went with her, and had memories of playing with Franklin Roosevelt's grandchildren.

Collins was drafted into the Army in early 1951 and served as a supply sergeant in Germany. This was the era when President Harry Truman ended segregation in the military, and Collins was able to witness first-hand how that changed both Army life and the Civil Rights movement.

Collins came to NSA in March 1955 as a traffic-processing clerk. He went into NSA's mainstream, but he saw how unofficial segregation was effected by generally assigning African Americans to keypunching or other menial jobs. He later recalled: "Segregation was never an Agency policy. However, the Agency was a microcosm of society. The social structure of the '50s fostered segregation."

His supervisors recognized Collins' talent for cryptanalysis, and he worked in this field until 1969. At that time he began to realize that he needed diversification if he were to achieve his ambition to reach the senior ranks of the Agency.

Collins believed NSA's move from northern Virginia to Fort Meade in the mid-1950s was harmful to the Agency's African Americans. Both locations exhibited the same racist attitudes; he remembered having to eat at segregated lunch counters in Virginia, and found the same conditions in some Maryland areas. However, many minority employees were on the lower end of the pay scale and could not afford to make the move to Ft. Meade or could not find housing in the new location. This meant they had longer commutes and could not engage in career-enhancing activities, and did not participate in activities that would foster contacts (what today we call "networking") that led to job opportunities.

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Collins himself, though, managed to advance in his career. Lou Green, an NSA senior who mentored many minority employees, helped him get a position on a key component staff, where he learned budgeting. Collins got certified* in both cryptanalysis and resource management. After a variety of staff positions, in 1979 he achieved one of his goals: he became senior operations officer (SOO) at NSOC.

In 1988 he was named deputy chief of a major production group, and in 1990 he became the assistant deputy director of administration, then one of NSA's key components. In this position, he could draw attention to the statistics on minority hiring and opportunity at NSA and to expand the opportunities.

Oscar Collins retired from NSA in 1994.

* From the 1960s through the 1990s, NSA employees who expected promotion had to get "certified" in a career field. Certification was based on education, job experience, and successful completion of a Professional Qualifications Examination (PQE). This process frequently was used as a gatekeeper system for promotion to GG-12 or GG-13. "Certification" also was known as "professionalization."

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